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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001222

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TAGS: [PFOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: FREED MP CALLS FOR SHADOW GOVERNMENT, UNSC DEBATE

REF: A. MINSK 172

[1](#)B. MINSK 965

[1](#)C. MINSK 1204

MINSK 00001222 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Ambassador recently met with former opposition MP and political prisoner Sergey Skrebets following his release on amnesty. While Skrebets described the prison conditions he and fellow hunger striking political prisoner Aleksandr Kozulin faced as somewhat better than the general prison population, Skrebets noted that authorities repeatedly denied him and Kozulin contact with their families and attorneys. Noting that he will represent Kozulin at the upcoming congress of Belarusian opposition forces, Skrebets called on the opposition to create a shadow government and on the United States to raise the human rights situation in Belarus at the UN Security Council. Although such actions are probably impracticable, Skrebets' efforts to unify Belarus' social democrats behind the cause of liberating Belarusian political prisoners is laudable. End Summary.

Skrebets on Amnesty and Prison Conditions

[1](#)2. (C) On November 21, Ambassador met with former opposition MP and political prisoner Sergey Skrebets, whom the Belarusian Supreme Court convicted on February 14 on politically motivated charges of securifg an illegal loan for his business and illegally managing a company while serving as an MP (reftel A). (Note: The court sentenced Skrebets to 30 months in prison, minus nine months served in pre-trial detention in connection with a bribery charge, of which Skrebets was acquitted.) On November 15, Skrebets was released on what authorities called an amnesty. However, while meeting with Ambassador, Skrebets emphatically objected to any implication of GOB clemency on the grounds that he was legally entitled to amnesty as early as March and because of his treatment in the Vitsba-3 prison.

[1](#)3. (C) While conceding that medical and sanitation conditions for political prisoners are in general better than those of the general prison population, Skrebets decried the unusual psychological abuse and isolation that he and his fellow prisoners of conscience endure. He noted that the prison administration repeatedly denied his wife permission to visit him, even on his birthday. Skrebets added that while he staged a 40-day hunger strike during his pre-trial

detention authorities continually refused him legal counsel.

Kozulin's Hunger Strike and Isolation

¶4. (C) Referring to imprisoned opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) Chair and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin, Ambassador asked Skrebets whether such isolation is typical for hunger striking political prisoners (ref B). Skrebets responded affirmatively but intimated that the authorities are applying unusually high pressure on Kozulin by denying him contact with his family and lawyers until Kozulin ends the hunger strike that he began on October 20 to protest the start of President Lukashenko's fraudulently elected third term (ref C). (Note: Skrebets had again been on hunger strike for nearly three weeks prior to his release as a demonstration of solidarity with Kozulin. End note.)

¶5. (C) Skrebets confirmed reports that Kozulin's wife Irina Kozulina had attempted to visit her husband at Vitsba-3 on November 16 but again had been turned away by prison authorities. Skrebets also related that Kozulin attorney Igor Rynkevich had told him just before meeting with Ambassador that authorities had again refused Rynkevich a meeting with Kozulin on the false grounds that the prisoner did not want to meet with anyone.

¶6. (C) Noting that he had daily contact with Kozulin since Kozulin's imprisonment at Vitsba-3, Skrebets reiterated to Ambassador his earlier public statement that Kozulin has lost about 20 percent of his body weight (ref C). When Ambassador asked whether Kozulin would continue his hunger strike to the end, Skrebets responded that Kozulin would make that decision when he has lost 30 percent of his body weight because Kozulin believes that he can still recover fully from the effects of his hunger strike until that time. According to Skrebets, Kozulin would base his decision to continue or end

MINSK 00001222 002.2 OF 002

the strike on the response of the Belarusian opposition and the international community to Kozulin's call for action against the Lukashenko regime.

Shadow Government to Force Opposition to Put Up or Shut Up

¶7. (C) Skrebets reiterated and endorsed Kozulin's call upon Belarus' opposition to convene a large-scale meeting of the leaders of the major parties of the United Democratic Forces (UDF), the Belarusian diaspora, and members of the 13th Supreme Soviet, which Lukashenko disbanded in 1996, with the purpose of forming a shadow government. This shadow government would proclaim sovereignty and request international recognition. According to Skrebets, Kozulin believes that such a meeting on the formation of a shadow government would force UDF leaders to prove their courage and commitment to democratic change in Belarus or make way for new leaders willing to do so. When Ambassador asked Skrebets whether he sees new leaders ready to step forward, he replied that the support shown for Kozulin, especially among young people, had revealed the existence of such potential leadership.

Requests UN Security Council Debate on Belarus

¶8. (C) Seeming to recognize the ambitiousness of Kozulin's proposal, Skrebets' suggested a somewhat more modest action from the international community by requesting that the U.S. "raise the possibility of raising the issue of Belarus" at the UN Security Council. When Ambassador mentioned past U.S. sponsorship of UN General Assembly resolutions on Belarus and noted that the GOB recently seemed to be more adroit in its dealings with the UN, Skrebets conceded that an actual debate in the Security Council about Belarus was not likely but

insisted that the U.S. could send a powerful message to the Lukashenko regime by proposing such a debate.

Skrebets' Future Plans

¶9. (C) When Ambassador asked Skrebets about his plans for the future, Skrebets responded that he would focus on rest and recuperation and that he had not decided whether to return to politics. However, Skrebets noted that he would speak on behalf of Kozulin at the second UDF congress following the January 14 local elections. Moreover, he mentioned that he had already met with internally exiled former BSDP leader Nikolai Statkevich and former Head of State Stanislav Shushkevich in an effort to unify Belarusian social democrats behind the cause of emancipating Kozulin and other Belarusian political prisoners.

Comment

¶10. (C) Skrebets' objections to interpreting his "amnesty" as GOB clemency are quite right. The reasons and conditions of his politically motivated imprisonment constitute an egregious violation of his basic human rights and those of the Belarusian people. Although his calls for a shadow government and Security Council debates are probably unrealistic at this time, his participation on Kozulin's behalf at the upcoming UDF congress and his efforts to unify the various BSDP factions and personalities could contribute to holding the Belarusian opposition together in the run-up to next year's parliamentary elections.

Stewart